A bloody brouhaha over Basque ancestral claims

MADRID — When I was young, I thought a Basque was a tight corset. I was wrong. That’s a basque. Before my Basque friends get upset, let me remind them that whenever I state my nationality – I, Soy Escocés (“I’m Scottish”), I am told that (a) I look fatter; (b) slimmer; or (c) of greater alcohol content than any bottle of whisky they have so far encountered.

While I admit to partaking with abandon of my country’s best-known product, my Basque friends are not over-eager to be equated with wearing the corset for which they are best-known beyond the Bay of Biscay.

Strange, though, to live through the current brouhaha over whether the Basques are Spain’s, Europe’s, perhaps the world’s oldest people. The Basques’ greatest surprise over the news that Americans had landed on the moon was said to be that no lunar inhabitants were on hand to welcome the astronauts with a friendly Basque Agur (“Hello”).

The latest fuss started last month when Xabier Arzalluz, leader of the Spanish Basque region’s main political party, the PNV, decided to put his cards on the table. The Basques, he said, had an unmatchable ratio of RH negative blood that suggested they were Europe’s oldest people. The problem for Spain’s Basque region, Mr Arzalluz said, was that “los de fuera” (those from outside) were fast becoming the majority on the Basques’ once pure-blooded soil. He was echoing remarks by the Basques’ 19th-century leader, Sabino de Arana, who believed that if you didn’t have “eight Basque surnames” you weren’t a true Basque.

“Sometimes it seems to me that those from outside want to take over here,” Mr Arzalluz said. “Of course, ethnic cleansing is one thing. We’re obviously against that. But it’s another thing when those from outside, with their votes from outside, turn themselves into the majority. Then our way of life, our personality will be lost . . .”

He had a point. Statistically, that is. So wonderful is the Basque country, or at least so great its industrial potential, that poor Spaniards from elsewhere in the peninsula have flocked to seek jobs there, often to be insulted by the Basques, in the same way as dust-bowl Oklahomans fled to pick peaches in California not too many years earlier. Since “those from outside” are already a majority of voters in the Basque country, Mr Arzalluz’s remarks were considered doubly questionable by most Spaniards.

Pushed by journalists a few days later, Mr Arzalluz, presumably, sought to backtrack. “What I meant to say was this,” he explained. “I mean, a Swede and a Zulu, they’re different, right?”

Needless to say, Mr Arzalluz’s remarks did not go unchallenged. A columnist in El Tiempo, well-meaning, obviously, but overreacting, perhaps, went out of his way to suggest that Zulus were streets ahead of Swedes. Do none of us really believe any more that equal we were created and equal we will always be?

“Two-thirds of Basques do not have RH negative blood,” howled the conservative daily ABC in a headline that crossed two pages.

If readers went further, they would have discovered “scientific proof” to back the headline up. But with headlines so clear, why read on? The daily El Mundo published a chart showing “the three basic races – Mongolid, Negroid and Caucasian”. Accompanying that feature was a column illustrated by photos of Mr Arzalluz, Martin Luther King and Hitler. Forget about the words. The juxtaposition of the pictures left readers free to consider the implication of the Basque politician’s remarks.

Madrid-based publications recalled that Mr Arzalluz, 60, trained as a Jesuit priest and was once known as “Hitler” by fellow students for his somewhat conservative point of view on the serological advantages he believed he and his fellow Basques shared. The non-Basque media pointed out that only one-quarter of the Spanish Basque region’s present 3 million inhabitants were now thought to be “pure-blooded”, a figure few Basques deny, indeed one that perhaps led Mr Arzalluz to express his concern.

In a letter to the daily El Pais, one reader, Alberto Rueda Estrade from the town of Logroño, put it better than I ever could. “In the Rioja region, a traditional land of passage for travellers, we are used to welcoming people. In recent years, we have seen a growing, silent invasion by Basques fleeing the sound of plastic explosives and the threat of a bullet in the back of the neck. They come here with their language, their eight Basque surnames and their rhesus [blood] intact. We know that they are ‘rhesus from outside’ but we don’t blame them.”